

When Someone Who Matters Gets Mad

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When someone who matters to us gets mad, it's upsetting. And when we can't seem to resolve whatever the issue is, it's not always easy to see our own part in making it difficult to work things out.

We may mean to make conscious choices in how we respond, so that we're healing instead of escalating the situation, but a lot of us aren't at all clear about what would help and what just makes things worse.

That's what I want to talk about today: What to do and what to avoid when someone who matters gets mad...when you want to respond in a way that strengthens the relationship rather than adding to the strain.

So first of all, what is it that causes someone to get angry?

People get mad at you when they feel that something important to them is not being treated with enough importance by you. From their perspective, you haven't shown that their ideas or feelings or wishes or needs or something that is important to them is that important to you.

So let's look first at the natural reflexes you might have when someone is mad at you, and what sort of effects you might expect if you handle the situation in one of these ways.

Let's say you walk in the door an hour late, and your partner is angry.

One reflex, as we all know, is to fight: Your face flushes, your heart races, you feel agitated as the adrenalin rushes into your system...You say things like, "What? You're never late?" or "You know, you sound just like your mother." or "So I'm late...you want to ruin the whole evening now?"

You protect yourself by making yourself dangerous.

Of course, this is just fuel on the fire for someone who's mad because they don't think you care enough about what's important to them. Now they're really mad.

Another reflex, especially when we feel less powerful than the person who's angry, is to submit. You might burst into tears, start

physically shaking, or just look stricken and say, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" in a tone that conveys just how terrible you already feel.

You try to stay safe by letting the angry person know they don't have to keep beating you up; you're already down.

The problem with this is that the person who's mad doesn't want to feel like the bad guy just for bringing up something up that's bothering them. They want you to focus on how they feel, not on you feel.

Another natural reflex is to flee. You might walk away from the physical space, saying something like "I don't deserve this! If you want to be mad, go ahead. But I don't have to listen to this."

Or you might cut yourself off emotionally and say something like, "Great! Now I have to listen to a tantrum! Go ahead, lay it on me!"

You keep yourself safe by physically or emotionally leaving.

But if you're not willing to be present for the other person when they're angry, this just throws more salt on the wound. It confirms that what's important to them doesn't matter to you.

Or the fourth natural reflex you might have is to freeze. The color drains out of your face, your expression goes blank, you're sick to your stomach, and your arms and legs feel weak. You are paralyzed and have nothing to say.

Like an animal that knows the gig is up – it's going to be eaten and resistance is futile – you shut down and become numb. This way, you won't have to feel any pain.

But to the person who's mad, this is maddening. Unable to get a reaction from you, they feel like they're not important enough to make any impact at all. If they don't just withdraw in despair, they may go nuclear on you in order to get some response.

So our natural reflexes – fight, submit, flee or freeze – certainly evolved for good reasons. They have their uses, and they arise in all of us from time to time, especially when we're taken by surprise.

But while they might be effective in getting the angry person to stop expressing how they feel, they aren't helpful in actually healing any wounds the relationship has incurred.

So what are the conscious choices we can make when we have the presence of mind initially or when we want to come back after a fight and do what we can to heal the situation...

Remember that whatever the issue is – attention, space, sex, money, daily chores, whether you can be counted on, or any number of specific concerns, what upsets the other person is that what's important to them doesn't seem important enough to you. And that makes them mad.

So the most healing, most deescalating, most calming thing you can do is to begin by making them feel important now. Right or wrong, reasonable or unreasonable, your fault or not – if they feel that you care about how they're feeling now, this is balm on the wound of whatever it was that made them angry in the first place.

How can you let them know that you care how they feel? At least in our culture, there are three basic ways – the three R's for dealing with anger – Receive, Reflect and Respond.

First, Receive: Give them eye contact, with an expression that looks receptive and interested in hearing what they have to say – not angry, not impatient, or crushed or shut down or, worst of all, amused...but receptive and interested in understanding how they feel and their point of view.

Second, Reflect: Show them that you're really listening to them by reflecting what you're hearing, which also gives them a chance to correct anything you didn't understand.

It's essential here that you not sneak your own perspective into the way you reflect their perspective. There's a world of difference between:

“So when I was late, then you felt like I didn't care very much about spending this time with you. Is that right?” versus

“So when I was late, you just assumed that this meant I don't love you or something? Is that what you're saying?”

Then the third “R” - Respond: Let them know that what they've said to you matters to you, which means they matter to you. This is healing. If you want to respond in a way that is care-ful – that is, full of care – then look for anything in what they're saying that you can validate. Even if you only agree with one little piece of their point of

view, try to focus on that, rather than looking for a piece that's unfair or untrue.

Maybe they said, "You're late! I've been waiting for an hour! You're always late!"

If you say, "I'm not always late! I was home on time yesterday!" or "I wasn't that late!" they're probably not going to see your point and feel less angry.

Instead, try saying: "I know. I told you I'd be home an hour ago. And this certainly isn't the first time I've been late."

Receive, Reflect and Respond..

The key is to make sure that they feel heard before you ask them to listen to your point of view. Then do make sure to share your own experience, because that's important too. But don't try to rush it, or you'll feel like you're in a game of Chutes and Ladders, getting set back again and again, just when you think you're almost there.

Let me leave you with this thought:

What separates relationships that last from those don't
Is not how many fights they have,
But how many of those fights they resolve.